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PROGRAM Dan Rather Reports

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SUBJECT Robert Gates

DAN RATHER: Dan Rather reporting, news analysis and commentary.

The Acting Director of the Central Intelligence Agency spent the day before the Senate Intelligence Committee. The Senators are considering whether Robert Gates should be confirmed to succeed former CIA chief William Casey, and today that seemed to hedge on whether Casey's former right-hand man was the man Congress could trust.

Thoughts on the measure of a man, after this.

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In his opening remarks before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Robert Gates today promised that as Director of the CIA he would avoid, quote, "the valleys of mistrust that now yarn so wide between the Congress, the American people and the intelligence agency."

But first, Gates will have to make his way out of the canyons of disceet surrounding the whole Iranian arms funds to the Contras scandal, and the climb began early.

Gates testified this morning that October 1, 1986, a CIA analyst warned him that funds from the secret Iranian arms sale might have been diverted to the Nicaraguan Contras.

On October 9th, he and William Casey, who was then the CIA chief, met with Colonel Oliver North. At that meeting, North made what Gates now calls a, quote, "cryptic reference" to a Swiss bank account and money for the Contras.

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Yet, according to this story, neither Gates nor Casey told Congress about a possible diversion because, as Gates put it, North's comments were, quote, "worrisome, but extraordinarily flimsy evidence." But, worrisome or not, Gates never looked into the matter further, or so he says.

Why?

Because, Gates told the Committee today, the CIA didn't want to get as close to the private Contra backers as would have been required to collect information about their actions. The Agency, said Gates, didn't want to do anything that could be misinterpreted as a CIA violation of the congressional limits on aid to the Contras.

But apparently Gates wasn't worried enough to question Colonel North about his remarks either.

Looking back on the whole messy and now embarrassing business, now that it has become a public embarrassment, Gates said the CIA may have erred in not pressing the President to inform Congress about the secret arms sales. In hindsight, Gates says he probably would have opposed the whole deal, and if put in the same situation in the future would even consider resignation.

That's what he said.

Given the outcome of this whole misadventure, Mr. Gates' pledges may not be insincere. However, sincerity is not a substitute for wisdom and judgment, and it is those traits which may be most necessary to mending any breach of trust between the CIA, the American people and the Congress. Good intentions are not substitutes for those qualities.

As this whole debacle was unfolding, Robert Gates wasn't some overworked clerk. He was the number two man at the CIA, hand-picked by William Casey. And what Gates knew about the Iranian-Contra debacle, what he decided to do with that information when he was second in command may be the only way we may measure what he might do if he's placed at the helm.

Many people believe that he can and will measure up. Meantime, the Senators plan to take their full two weeks to make this decision. Perhaps they know that this is not a good time for a bad fit.

Now, please, this message.

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Dan Rather reporting, CBS News.